

notable scientists, botanists and other historical or cultural figures.

## First Impressions

I received my nine Wollemi pines two weeks after the auction and was immediately impressed by their excellent condition.

I selected one tree named 'The Kiccoro', which means "forest child" in Japanese, to be turned into the world's first full bonsai Wollemi pine.

This tree was propagated in September 1999, stood 1.4m tall when delivered and had a base trunk diameter of about five centimetres.

As expected, in line with standard commercial nursery practice, all these trees were grown to stand bolt upright. The Wollemi pine can be multi-trunked and will also branch from soil level - all good signs for bonsai work.

However, closer inspection presented three challenges for bonsai styling work. Firstly, there is no consistent taper of the trunk or the major branches. In fact, all the two-metre Wollemi pines I have seen have remarkably uniform-diameter trunks and even show random reverse taper characteristics at various points in their growth.

This is particularly evident wherever there has been any bark damage or where the distinctive branching occurs. In some ways, the vertical growth resembles that of a Podocarpus (Japanese plum yew) and the growing crown can look much like a bunch of cigars held together.

The top-heavy canopy can also appear to droop until the new shoot growth hardens up, so obtaining a thick trunk base tapering to a fine apex is not this tree's natural shape.

Secondly, like its Araucariaceae cousins, the Wollemi pine grows axial branches and, particularly like the Bunya Bunya pine, the Wollemi pine's branches demonstrate irregular foliage growth.

The leaves are actually modified phylloids or needles that perform the same function as leaves. These leaves grow in parallel rows resembling the spine of the armour-plated dinosaur Stegosaurus, complete with tapering arch points that end in a bud.

When this new bud opens from the trunk or a resin cap it grows back a new Stegosaurus-shaped spine, but at a different size and even a different angle.

This is going to prove a huge headache for bonsai traditionalists who expect ever-refining and predictable branch ramification.

The third problem was that, being a relatively young tree grown from cutting, no prominent root growth had yet been formed so no *nebari* (or surface root structure) - so axiomatic to classic bonsai style - was possible at this time.

Fortunately, the abundant fibrous root ball indicated excellent tree health.

The soil was slightly acidic and showed



When purchased; The Kiccoro had a base trunk diameter of about five centimetres.

pH5.5 as kit-tested. (pH7 is neutral.) On the other hand, though fertile, the soil composition was totally unsuitable for bonsai.

Nearly all professional bonsai growers I know use what is known as an 'open mix' for planting. This consists of a high percentage of crushed rock and agricultural sand - up to between 70% and 80% - with the remainder desiccated aged manure and compost.

The reason for this is two-fold. Firstly, the high gravel content in the soil matrix provides excellent water drainage and, secondly, it provides a superior structural support, enhancing root development.

The trunk, branch, soil and root structures required a total rethink in order to be able to style and re-pot The Kiccoro into a bonsai pot.

Above all, an aesthetic decision needed to be made as to what bonsai style was most suitable for The Kiccoro.

As many people know, there are six fundamental classical bonsai styles: formal upright, informal upright, slanting, broom, semi cascade and full cascade.

There is also a large variety of non-classical styles reflecting specific environmental situations trees may be found, such as windswept,

root-over-rock and group-forest styles. Whichever style is selected for any tree should ideally reflect and enhance its natural qualities and growing characteristics.

With deep respect to the Wollemi pine's natural elegance and form, I have initially shaped The Kiccoro in a style that provides aesthetic movement to the tree while retaining its vertical grace.

I selected an informal upright (*moyogi*) style that I felt would retain the Wollemi pine's natural vertical characteristics while permitting ongoing development and research into this tree's coppicing inclination, axial branch growth and general growing qualities. In effect, The Kiccoro was going to become my teacher.

## Setting to work

Of the three main trunks, two were removed, leaving the lightest and most flexible, which was shaped using six-millimetre and two strands of five-millimetre anodised aluminium wire.

The trunk proved relatively easy to bend but retains a lot of memory and will require ongoing shaping. The new overall trunk height is now 80 centimetres.